

# Legislative Report Competency-based Education



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State of Iowa  
Department of Education  
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## HISTORY

House File 215 (Iowa Code 256.24) provided for districts in Iowa to investigate and study the implementation of competency-based education over 5 years beginning in 2013-14. (See Appendix A for the full section 256.24 of the Iowa Code.) In response to this legislation the Iowa Department of Education convened the Iowa Competency-based Education Collaborative. We will refer to “competency-based education” throughout this report as “CBE.” This report outlines the status and activities of the 9 Collaborative district members and participants from Area Education Agencies and Institutions of Higher Education, as well as the preliminary findings from their exploration and early implementation of CBE.

The Iowa CBE Collaborative School Districts:\*

Cedar Rapids	Muscatine
Collins-Maxwell	Nevada
Howard-Winneshiek	Spirit Lake
Marshalltown	Van Meter
Mason City	

\*As of 2015-16 the East Union Community School District is not a member of the Iowa CBE Collaborative.

Area Education Agencies that participate in the CBE Collaborative:

267	Keystone
Grant Wood	Mississippi Bend
Great Prairie	Northwest
Heartland	Prairie Lakes

Institutions of Higher Education that participate in the CBE Collaborative:

Drake University	Northwestern College Iowa
Grandview University	Simpson College
Hawkeye Community College	University of Iowa
Iowa State University	University of Northern Iowa
Kirkwood Community College	

External Partners:

West Wind Education Policy Inc., Iowa City  
Innovation Lab Network, Council of Chief State School Officers, Washington, D.C.

### Premise of the Iowa CBE Collaborative

The Iowa CBE Collaborative engages in cross-district and individual district efforts to explore and implement competency-based educational practices. The CBE Collaborative operates within the Iowa Department of Education’s [Guidelines for Competency-based Education](#), which include the Principles and Characteristics of a CBE system that guide Collaborative efforts.

## **Principles of Competency-based Education**

1. Students advance upon proficiency.
2. Competencies are based on enduring understandings and require the transfer of knowledge, skills, and the [Universal Constructs](#) to complex situations in and/or across content areas and/or beyond the classroom.
3. Assessment is meaningful and a positive learning experience for students.
4. Students receive rapid, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs.
5. All learning is validated regardless of when, where, or how students acquired and/or demonstrated the learning.

## **Characteristics of Competency-based Education**

1. The district has strong internal and external stakeholder commitment to and involvement in district-wide competency-based education.
2. The district nurtures a culture of continuous improvement.
3. The district adopts policies and procedures to support a competency-based system.
4. Competencies and scoring documents align with the Universal Constructs and the appropriate standards (Early Learning Standards, the Iowa Core standards, and other content standards not yet a part of the Iowa Core).
5. Assessments are a meaningful and positive learning experience for students.
6. The learning environment is student-centered and personalized.
7. Leadership is purposefully shared throughout the system.
8. Credit/advancement is based upon demonstration of proficiency.
9. The district provides technical and structural supports for teachers, students, and parents/guardians.
10. The district provides smooth transitions within and beyond the PreK-12 experience.

## **STATUS AND ACTIVITIES**

### **Cross-District Collaborative Meetings**

Collaborative funding supported four full-day meetings in Des Moines during fiscal year 2015-16 for participating districts, AEA members, and IHE representatives. These meetings provided opportunities for district teams to share work, reflect on actions, and plan for next steps.

The meeting dates and number of attendees are listed below:

- September 30, 2015 – 85 attendees
- November 18, 2015 – 74 attendees
- March 2, 2016 – 56 attendees
- April 20, 2016 - 64 attendees

The Iowa CBE Collaborative meetings provided time for team members to share relevant CBE work in large-group sessions or panel discussions. Examples of these sessions include district sharing with small and whole open discussion in September, district action planning in

November, a student and teacher presentation from Muscatine in March, and a personalized professional development panel from several districts in April.

In addition, the four meetings provided time for the districts to share their work during small group sessions. A majority of these small groups focused on Characteristic #6: “The learning environment is student-centered and personalized.” These sessions encompassed multiple grade levels, content areas, and included topics like blended learning, student-centered/personalized learning, project-based learning, and extended learning opportunities. In addition several other characteristics were addressed in small groups. These included #1 internal and external stakeholder commitment, #2 nurturing a culture of continuous improvement, #5 meaningful assessment, #8 credit advancement, and #9 technical support for teachers, students, and parents. For a list of small-group sessions offered around each of the Characteristics, see Appendix B.

### **District Work Teams**

The Collaborative budget provided each participating district with a grant to engage in individual action planning, learning, and efforts. The districts were administered a survey asking them to share specific activities they engaged in during 2015-16 to support the implementation of CBE in their district. Districts shared that their CBE work teams took part in several professional development activities, including:

- The Scale Institute on Performance Tasks
- Iowa ASCD Standards-based Grading workshops
- Grading Practices professional development with Ken O’Connor
- Learner-centered professional development around standards-based grading

Districts also reported additional individual work completed outside Collaborative meetings. The following are examples of work in one or more districts:

- Explored new web-based data systems to work with CBE
- Engaged stakeholders in book studies
- Created a district CBE website to share with stakeholders
- Implemented new scoring guides in ELA
- Worked on performance tasks for an elementary school
- Gathered information from P21 and the Buck Institute to use in competency writing
- Created professional learner communities to work on CBE
- Worked towards greater stakeholder engagement and crafted communication plans
- Worked on enhancing project-based education learning opportunities
- Worked on efforts to increase student voice and choice, including creating student panels
- Worked towards aligning standards and competencies

In addition, several of the district teams visited other Collaborative districts to enhance sharing around CBE. Iowa BIG from Cedar Rapids hosted several districts from the Collaborative, Iowa, and all over the country, while Van Meter and Nevada hosted other Collaborative districts and Mason City hosted Iowa districts that are not in the Collaborative.

Some Collaborative districts also traveled to other states to visit districts implementing CBE and brought their learning back to the Collaborative meetings. Several districts visited schools in Wisconsin, including Pewaukee, Kettle Moraine, and Waukesha, to learn more about the

schools that are part of the Institute for Personalized Learning, gather information about web-based data systems, and see personalized learning in action. One district visited Pea Ridge, AR, to learn more about the flex mod schedule.

### **Competencies**

As part of the Collaborative's commitment to producing resources for Collaborative members and for those beyond the Collaborative following Year 5, teams of teachers, administrators, and consultants continued to draft exemplar competencies and scoring documents to serve as models for pilot efforts. These competencies are conceptual-level performance assessments (Webb's Depth of Knowledge 3 or 4) designed from the Iowa Core standards and they define the course competencies through which students can demonstrate proficiency to earn course credit. To prepare students to be college and career ready, each competency demands that students participate in the design process so they are agents of their own learning, transfer the learning within/beyond the discipline and/or beyond the walls of the school, and exhibit one or more Universal Constructs as part of their demonstration of competency.

During fiscal year 2015-2016, 31 teachers and consultants participated in the competency design process, including individuals from the Department of Education, Muscatine, Mason City, Cedar Rapids, Spirit Lake, Marshalltown, Mississippi Bend AEA, and AEA 267, with some additional support from IHE personnel when available. Discipline-specific teams met at the Department of Education over a total of 30 days for two-day design sessions in math, science, and the English language arts. To date the Collaborative members and support personnel have produced six Universal Construct competencies, 18 science competencies primarily in grades 6-12 (Life Science, Earth and Space Science, Physical Science), 18 competencies for English language arts (6-12), 18 high school math competencies (Algebra I and II, Geometry, Numbers and Operations, Probability and Statistics), five middle school algebra competencies, six elementary algebra competencies (one each in grades K-5), four middle school probability and statistics competencies, one elementary probability and statistics competency, and three overarching modern language competencies (interpersonal, presentational, and interpretive). The modern language competencies also include learning progression scoring guides from "novice" to "distinguished" that include the embedded cultural competency.

Teams also developed a common competency scoring guide template to connect across disciplines, especially to benefit students and teachers who are working in cross curricular teams or those whose teaching responsibilities include more than one discipline. The development of a competency scoring guide included determining the nature of proficiency, as well as indicators for students who are approaching proficiency and those who are exceeding proficiency. Teams drafted scoring guides in English language arts (one each in grades 6-9), science (7th grade life science and one for high school Biology), and math (Algebra I), with standards-based rubrics for the nested standards, all of which are aligned to the state's Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)..

### **Collecting Data and Crafting Resources**

One of the goals of the Iowa CBE Collaborative is to create a web-based tool to support scaling CBE in Iowa. To that end, the Collaborative budget supported efforts to collect and share data on how CBE innovations support student growth and instructional practices. The Collaborative convened a Peer Review Committee made up of 12 AEA and IHE Collaborative members. The

Committee met 6 times during 2015-16. The Committee elected a chairperson to lead the work and was supported by West Wind Education Policy Inc.

The Committee created a Resource Review Rubric and review process to ensure that quality tools and protocols will be shared in the framework for CBE. The Resource Review Rubric is provided in Appendix C.

The Committee received a total of eight resources from participating districts and reviewed a total of five resources. The committee provided feedback to support improvement of the five resources and two of these resources have been resubmitted and reviewed a second time..

### **Technical Assistance Workshops**

In April 2016, West Wind Education Policy Inc. provided three districts -- Marshalltown, Muscatine, and Nevada -- with technical assistance workshops to help them to identify framework resources and to determine how they will demonstrate the effectiveness of their CBE initiatives. These workshops revealed that districts need support in crafting tools to collect evidence and support in creating and curating resources to share. In response to these workshops, West Wind Education Policy Inc. designed a series of technical assistance workshops to best support districts in 2016-17.

### **Data Collection Interviews and Analysis**

Collaborative funding also supported an over-arching data collection process designed to determine district priorities and needs for support in the coming year. During April and May of 2016, West Wind Education Policy Inc. conducted interviews with the nine Iowa CBE Collaborative districts. This is the third year West Wind has conducted data collection interviews with the districts.

Administrators and teachers were interviewed to provide insights into how the Collaborative districts are approaching and implementing CBE. If carefully considered, these data can shape and support the work of the Collaborative in Year Four.

Data collection was intended to find commonalities in these districts -- strengths, struggles, and barriers districts face when exploring, designing, and implementing CBE -- and to understand exceptional circumstances in some. Districts were assured that the data collected will not be used as a measure of accountability.

Preliminary results are provided in the section on findings and recommendations.



## STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT RESULTS

The following table summarizes the student achievement from the nine districts as part of the Collaborative. Using the Iowa Assessments, the percentage of proficient and advanced students stayed the same or increased in 5 districts in math and 8 in reading from 2012-2013 to 2015-2016.

Percentages of students' performance (not proficient, proficient, advanced) on Iowa Assessments 2012-2013 to 2015-2016

	Mathematics or MT No Comp (a)				Reading (a)			
	2012-2013				2012-2013			
	Not Proficient	Proficient	Advanced	Total	Not Proficient	Proficient	Advanced	Total
Cedar Rapids Community School District (1053)	23.05	52.47	24.48	76.95	29.92	54.83	15.24	70.08
Collins-Maxwell Community School District (1350)	24.34	64.16	11.50	75.66	33.19	57.52	9.29	66.81
Howard-Winneshiek Community School District (3025)	27.29	59.32	13.39	72.71	33.50	56.97	9.52	66.50
Marshalltown Community School District (4104)	30.20	54.30	15.50	69.80	42.18	49.26	8.57	57.82
Mason City Community School District (4131)	27.97	58.38	13.65	72.03	31.82	56.04	12.14	68.18
Muscatine Community School District (4581)	29.53	54.14	16.33	70.47	32.86	56.15	10.99	67.14
Nevada Community School District (4617)	21.18	57.06	21.76	78.82	19.88	60.37	19.74	80.12
Spirit Lake Community School District (6120)	13.53	59.93	26.54	86.47	18.95	63.33	17.72	81.05
Van Meter Community School District (6615)	11.31	62.69	25.99	88.69	14.37	63.00	22.63	85.63
<b>Iowa (District View)</b>	22.27	56.23	21.50	77.73	26.96	57.79	15.25	73.04
	Mathematics or MT No Comp (a)				Reading (a)			
	2013-2014				2013-2014			
	Not Proficient	Proficient	Advanced	Total	Not Proficient	Proficient	Advanced	Total
Cedar Rapids Community School District (1053)	23.13	49.61	27.26	76.87	27.56	49.44	23.00	72.44
Collins-Maxwell Community School District (1350)	20.83	58.33	20.83	79.17	24.07	50.93	25.00	75.93
Howard-Winneshiek Community School District (3025)	21.16	60.32	18.52	78.84	31.22	56.26	12.52	68.78
Marshalltown Community School District (4104)	30.36	51.82	17.82	69.64	37.85	48.74	13.41	62.15
Mason City Community School District (4131)	23.32	57.30	19.38	76.68	26.75	52.70	20.55	73.25
Muscatine Community School District (4581)	28.90	52.07	19.03	71.10	30.54	51.98	17.49	69.46
Nevada Community School District (4617)	17.91	53.99	28.10	82.09	16.39	50.55	33.06	83.61
Spirit Lake Community School District (6120)	12.01	60.78	27.21	87.99	19.61	60.25	20.14	80.39
Van Meter Community School District (6615)	10.03	53.39	36.58	89.97	12.65	57.65	29.71	87.35
<b>Iowa (District View)</b>	19.80	54.01	26.19	80.20	23.47	54.12	22.41	76.53
	Mathematics or MT No Comp (a)				Reading (a)			
	2014-2015				2014-2015			
	Not Proficient	Proficient	Advanced	Total	Not Proficient	Proficient	Advanced	Total
Cedar Rapids Community School District (1053)	24.73	50.91	24.35	75.27	27.61	49.69	22.70	72.39
Collins-Maxwell Community School District (1350)	26.54	51.66	21.80	73.46	23.58	59.43	16.98	76.42
Howard-Winneshiek Community School District (3025)	19.31	60.62	20.08	80.69	22.39	62.55	15.06	77.61
Marshalltown Community School District (4104)	30.05	54.09	15.86	69.95	37.51	49.70	12.80	62.49
Mason City Community School District (4131)	23.28	55.16	21.55	76.72	27.99	52.74	19.27	72.01
Muscatine Community School District (4581)	28.82	53.57	17.61	71.18	27.66	52.26	20.08	72.34
Nevada Community School District (4617)	15.26	54.90	29.84	84.74	13.35	53.95	32.70	86.65
Spirit Lake Community School District (6120)	11.81	57.01	31.18	88.19	16.79	56.46	26.75	83.21
Van Meter Community School District (6615)	7.38	48.31	44.31	92.62	11.69	57.85	30.46	88.31
<b>Iowa (District View)</b>	19.55	52.94	27.51	80.45	22.64	53.43	23.92	77.36
	Mathematics or MT No Comp (a)				Reading (a)			
	2015-2016				2015-2016			
	Not Proficient	Proficient	Advanced	Total	Not Proficient	Proficient	Advanced	Total
Cedar Rapids Community School District (1053)	27.12	50.02	22.86	72.88	28.69	49.19	22.11	71.31
Collins-Maxwell Community School District (1350)	31.68	52.48	15.84	68.32	31.19	56.44	12.38	68.81
Howard-Winneshiek Community School District (3025)	15.58	63.82	20.59	84.42	27.09	58.81	14.10	72.91
Marshalltown Community School District (4104)	31.77	54.14	14.09	68.23	38.62	49.57	11.81	61.38
Mason City Community School District (4131)	27.83	53.56	18.61	72.17	29.73	51.44	18.82	70.27
Muscatine Community School District (4581)	30.43	52.19	17.38	69.57	29.43	51.09	19.47	70.57
Nevada Community School District (4617)	18.66	55.44	25.91	81.34	19.19	50.74	30.07	80.81
Spirit Lake Community School District (6120)	12.26	54.71	33.04	87.74	15.63	59.86	24.51	84.37
Van Meter Community School District (6615)	9.85	46.87	43.28	90.15	14.93	56.12	28.96	85.07
<b>Iowa (District View)</b>	20.20	52.52	27.28	79.80	23.30	53.03	23.67	76.70



## PRELIMINARY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

These preliminary findings are based on the Data Collection interviews and analysis conducted by West Wind Education Policy Inc. in April and May 2016.

**Finding 1. Interviewees express a strong appreciation for the state's support of their CBE efforts.** This includes the state funding, the legitimacy a state initiative gives district efforts, and the opportunity to develop relationships with other Iowa districts engaged in similar work. Interviewees expressed a belief that the state funding for Collaborative districts has provided important learning opportunities through attendance at Collaborative meetings and funding for site visits to other districts. It has also helped to strengthen the legitimacy of the innovations Collaborative members are bringing back to their districts. Several interviewees mentioned that the state financial support has allowed them to visit other districts and has provided subs for teachers to come to Collaborative meetings or do other professional development.

**Finding 2. Districts are at different places in their CBE work, so they experience Collaborative meetings differently.** Interviewees expressed that they valued the opportunities for discussions and sharing among members during Collaborative meetings. As examples of this learning they mentioned the power of seeing examples from other districts, sharing obstacles and learnings, and developing a shared vocabulary around CBE.

Some interviewees shared that Collaborative work sometimes takes time that they feel they could better spend on efforts in their districts. They mention that they have different entry points to the work and approach tasks in different ways. The challenge is to ensure that Collaborative meetings are meaningful experiences for all Collaborative members.

**Finding 3. Districts identify a need for ongoing professional development around key tenets of CBE.** Many interviewees share a concern that they have not had access to prolonged, meaningful professional development as they have engaged in CBE. Their concerns point to a desire to engage a broad vision of CBE and to focus on more narrowly defined skill development to support their CBE efforts. There is a desire for professional development on time management for teachers, performance assessment in a CBE system, developing a common language, supporting student acclimation to a new learning environment, using technology to support student growth, and leading systems change. Interviewees identify a need for a shared understanding of blended learning, project-based learning, flipped classrooms and the relationship of these to CBE.

Professional development that includes visiting other districts seems to have a powerful effect on interviewees. Many interviewees highlight the opportunities to simply speak with other educators engaged in CBE as particularly helpful. However, it is often unclear how they make their learnings meaningful to their own district context and needs.

Interviewees express a clear need for professional development in learning how to use technology in creating personalized learning environments and in assessment of student learning. Collaborative members are dedicating significant time to identifying, testing, and manipulating a wide variety of programs, websites, and platforms to support their CBE efforts.

**Recommendation: There is a need for understanding a consistent vision of CBE in the collaborative and professional learning to support that vision.**

**Finding 4: Districts are relying heavily on anecdotal evidence in evaluating their current CBE efforts.** This has significant implications for all district CBE work.

Overall interviewees see a positive correlation between their CBE efforts and increased student engagement. While interviewees cite both increased attendance and lower behavior referrals during CBE-related learning opportunities as evidence of increased student engagement, it is not clear if they are using these data and/or collecting, analyzing, and using other data to substantiate their perception of increased student engagement.

It is not always clear how districts are evaluating the impact of self-pacing for students both in terms of demonstrating proficiency and identifying if particular student populations are more or less successful in self-pacing learning environments.

There also appears to be a growing sense that CBE might not be the best education system for all students. However, it is unclear what evidence districts are using to identify which students CBE works for and which it does not.

**Recommendation: There is a need for quantitative data to evaluate all components of the CBE pilot.**

**Finding 5. Most districts see standards-based grading as a first step in transitioning to CBE.** Most districts are using standards-based grading at either some grade levels (particularly elementary grades) and need support in expanding their use of standards-based grading and in making the transition to competencies. Interviewees voice differing attitudes towards how ready they are to transition to standards-based grading or competencies.

Most districts are actively using standards and engaging students in understanding the standards they are working to master. Most interviewees refer specifically to the standards in the Iowa Core. Most districts are developing and using standards with their staff and engaging students in discussions about the standards and how they guide learning goals and student progress.

**Finding 6. While districts actively engage students and teachers in using standards to guide learning, most of them do not clearly articulate a definition of competencies and the relationship between standards and competencies.** Several districts also do not have a clear idea of when or how to make the transition from standards to competencies. For a few districts, the move to standards-based grading has not begun in their district or building; for others, they are comfortable using the standards to assess and do not see the immediate need to transition to competencies.

**Recommendation: There is a need for a consistent vision of CBE and how/if competencies fit into it.**

**Finding 7. Many districts are engaged in similar CBE efforts, yet most are not sharing their tools, techniques, and experiences in ways that allow Collaborative members to support each other in refining their work or engage in deep examination with each other.** Most districts did not report sharing specific processes or tools with other Collaborative districts for feedback or as potential tools for other districts to use. Significant support to help them share these resources and lessons learned, and to engage in collaborative feedback is needed in 2016-17.

**Recommendation: Successful tools, techniques, and experiences need to be shared throughout the Collaborative.**

**Finding 8: Interviewees discuss time as both a constraint and an opportunity in their CBE efforts.** Many of them discuss the struggle of trying to create self-paced learning experiences for students within existing time structures. This speaks to the reality that CBE efforts in most Collaborative districts are narrowly confined to specific classes or grade levels rather than entire buildings or districts.

**Finding 9. While many interviewees discuss issues related to equity, the interviews reveal that Collaborative members define and engage equity differently from one another and sometimes differently from colleagues within their own districts.** Nearly all of the interviewees talked about CBE and/or personalized learning as an equalizing factor with the potential to reach students who have not succeeded in a traditional school setting. Several districts discussed using CBE as a way to support students who are credit deficient and need to graduate. In fact, two of the districts chose their alternative high schools as the buildings to include in these interviews. Some interviewees specifically discussed how they see CBE supporting subgroups of students, including students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and students from racial minorities in a community.

Other interviewees were broader in their discussions of equity. Several stated that the underlying tenants of personalization and individualization in CBE create a foundation of equity.

**Finding 10. Many interviewees share that they see nurturing community and business partnerships as key to CBE.** Districts discuss business partnerships in two ways: 1) engaging business and community leaders in thinking about systems change and/or 2) engaging businesses in project-based learning opportunities.

When engaging businesses to think about a new education system districts often look to businesses as partners in identifying what students need to learn and what skills they need to develop. When engaging businesses in project-based learning it appears that districts reach out to local community and business groups to provide students opportunities for real world experiences. It is unclear if/how districts are supporting local businesses or community groups in designing meaningful real world experiences for students or how such student experiences are evaluated.

The importance of actually leaving the classroom or engaging in actual partnerships with businesses in PBL seems to vary in the Collaborative districts and among the interviewees. For example, in several districts students work with businesses on projects that take them outside the classroom to learn. In contrast, in one classroom a principal was asked to play the role of a CEO as students presented a project.

**Recommendation: Community and business partnerships need to be strengthened and expanded.**

**Finding 11. Based on these interviews the Collaborative districts seem to embrace PBL as a key component of a CBE system.** PBL appears to be a way for many districts to introduce a new learning environment and style for short periods of time that can be expanded as students and stakeholders get more comfortable with it. Part of the value interviewees share that they see in PBL is the ability to make learning “authentic” and relevant to what several of them call the “real world.” This can mean different things in different districts.

**Finding 12. Most districts have introduced CBE in segmented ways, a particular classroom, grade level, building, etc., and are unsure of how to expand their CBE efforts.**

It is common for districts to introduce CBE slowly in a small setting. Significant support is needed to help districts enhance CBE learning opportunities throughout buildings and districts.

**Summary Recommendations:** The initial findings point to a few important preliminary recommendations: a consistent vision of CBE for districts in the collaborative, professional learning to support that vision, and a way to share lessons learned and successful and tools, techniques, and experiences (including business partnerships and competencies). However, these recommendations were based on anecdotal data. Therefore, year five of the Collaborative must focus on evaluating the work empirically to determine the efficacy of practice and impact on student achievement. After that is done, real recommendations for programing for year 6 and beyond will be apparent. Thank you for the opportunity for CBE to exist and be explored in Iowa.